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ABSTRACT

Interviews with 34 teachers at a rural high school in northeastern Connecticut examined cognitive constraints affecting teacher involvement in participative decision making. The principal recently restructured the school in an attempt to ensure teacher decision making. Data collection consisted of a standardized open-ended interview conducted at the school. Teachers perceived that the majority of their decisions were made under cognitive constraints and indicated a lack of adequate information and time. Teachers attributed time constraints to a lack of administrative support. Time constraints caused teachers to become uncertain in their decision making, and the quick changes in the structure of school governance caused confusion for teachers. A teacher coordinator of the new structure believed that the school governance change had occurred too quickly and that faculty felt they were forced to make decisions before they were ready. Other teachers reported operating under "pseudo decision-making," whereby the appearance of decision-making power is provided, but the decision is actually made by the administrator in charge. These results do not support previous research that characterized rural schools as the epitome of school-based decision making. (KS)

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Rural School Reform:

Teacher Decision Making

And Cognitive Constraints

A Paper Presented at
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ABSTRACT

This case study represents an effort to examine teacher decision making in a rural regional secondary school in Northeast Connecticut. It was designed to analyze teachers' perceptions of the constraints imposed upon their decision making in a rural school which had recently initiated participatory decision making structures. The study sought to answer the question, "Under what cognitive decision making constraints do rural teachers perceive they make school decisions?" Using Janis' (1989) model of decision making constraints, this study examined cognitive constraints which included: limited time for analysis and deliberation, lack of expertise, and scarce organizational resources for information gathering. Teachers perceived that they operated under considerable time constraints and that their decisions suffered from a lack of information. The limited amount of time and information were believed to be intricately related. Teachers believed they operated under a myth of shared decision making in what Lortie (1969) identified as pseudo decision making.

Introduction

Many assertions concerning rural education provide images of small rural American schools operating under a school governance structure that upholds solid democratic values. Rural schools have been judged to be both democratic and malleable (Monk & Haller, 1990). Roland Barth (1988) characterizes the small rural school as a community of leaders and maintains that teachers in rural schools "enjoy schoolwide leadership over issues from leaky roofs to parental involvement" (144). It has been claimed that "the single building rural school district presents the epitome of school-based decision making (Lomotey & Swanson, 1990, 79).

Lewis (1989) suggests that school based participatory decision making "is a mainstay of school organization in rural areas" (6) and continues asserting that "teachers in rural schools indicate...that they believe they are considerably involved in making decisions about such areas as curriculum, discipline, and use of time" (6).

This case study represents an effort to examine teacher decision making in Helmswood High School, a rural regional secondary school in Northeast Connecticut. The study was designed to analyze teachers' perceptions of the cognitive constraints under which they made decisions. Helmswood High School had recently initiated participatory decision making structures. An understanding of teachers' perceptions of decision making

constraints in a newly restructured high school could shed significant light on the problems and pitfalls of initiating school based participatory management structures.

Using Janis' (1989) model of decision making, the study sought to answer, "Under what cognitive decision making constraints do rural secondary school teachers perceive they make school decisions?" This study suggests that teachers at Helmswood High operated under what they perceived as considerable time constraints and believed that they engaged in what Janis (1989) has termed rapid fire decisions.

Theoretical Framework

Decision making research has often been compartmentalized (Hunt & Magenau, 1984) and has usually emphasized either the organization, the decision maker, or the desired outcome. This study focused on the newly initiated school governance structure of a rural high school, the teacher as decision maker and the cognitive decision making constraints under which teachers perceived they operated.

Decision making has been defined as an outcome of a transaction of person(s) and problems(s) in a setting (Mintzberg et al. 1976). Harrison (1981) explains that decision making is:

> ...a moment in an ongoing process of evaluating alternatives for meeting an objective, at which expectations about a particular course of action impels the decision maker to select that course of action most likely to result in attaining the objective (3).

Hunt and Magenau (1984) contend that decisions are implicit choices or preferences that "precede and follow overt action"

(119). They contend that no matter what a decision maker's preferences, decisions may or may not be implemented in action. Decisions depend upon circumstances that may be separate from the decision itself (Hunt & Magenau, 1984). Circumstances of the decision may involve the personality of the decision maker, and the perception that individual holds of the environment in which the decision will take place. A decision maker imposes an imprint of himself or herself on the decision-making process (Hunt & Magenau, 1984) and is a role player (Mintzberg et al., 1978; Pffefer & Salancik, 1978).

Studies on teacher decision making have been predicated on the assumption that the forming of participatory decision making structures encourages teachers to assume greater responsibility for what goes on in their school. The idea being that those closest to the client are in the best position to make decisions concerning the client's welfare. Research on teacher decision making has exhibited remarkable consistency (Keith & Girling, 1991), the majority of research presents positive findings.

Shared decision making has been linked to teacher job satisfaction (Hoy & Sousa, 1984; Miskel, Fevurly, Stewart, 1979; Schneider, 1984), school loyalty (Hoy & Sousa, 1984) and allegiance to the principal (Johnson & Germinario, 1985). Participation in decision making has also been examined as a key determinant of teacher stress (Bacharach, Bauer, & Conley, 1986), teacher role ambiguity, and role conflict (Alluto & Belasco, 1972; Mohrman, Cooke, & Mohrman, 1978).

Teacher decision making constraints comprise a relatively new area of study. Keith and Girling (1991) identify three major categories of decision constraints found within schools. These are (1) structural constraints, (2) contextual constraints, and (3) attitudinal constraints. Structural constraints may be defined in terms of the degree of formalization and hierarchical differentiation evident in the school. School that are highly structured may cause decision making to be constrained due to departmental differentiation, thus preventing interdisciplinary solutions. Over-formalization or reliance on rules and procedures inhibit creative decision making. Formal structures constrain decision making by causing the decision maker to spend time gaining permission from higher organizational layers.

Contextual constraints to decision making are those under which the school as a whole may react poorly in its decision making by reaching a premature consensus or falling victim to "groupthink," which has been defined as "the loss of willingness and ability of group members to evaluate one another's ideas critically, thereby producing a deterioration of a group's problem-solving ability" (Keith & Girling, 1991, 127). The decision maker's attitudes may act as a constraint on his or her decision making ability. Attitudinal constraints can be characterized as a feeling of intimidation, or the failure to see the problems that are in need of solutions.

Janis' (1989) model of decision making constraints presents an alternative framework of decision making that integrates research

on policy making, cognitive psychology, sociology, group theory, organizational behavior, and political analysis. The assumptions undergirding Janis' (1989) model of decision making constraints suggest that (1) symptoms of defective decision making are to be expected whenever decisions are arrived at by relying upon simple decision rules, and (2) decision making employing simple decision rules tends to lead to undesirable outcomes. Janis (1980) places decision making constraints into three categories: (1) cognitive constraints, (2) affiliative constraints, and egocentric or self-serving, emotive constraints. Examples of cognitive constraints provided by Janis (1989) include: limited time for analysis and deliberation, lack of expertise, scant organizational resources for information gathering, as well as other related problem solving constraints such as rapid fire decisions, satisficing and analogizing. Rapid fire decisions are those decisions whereby the individual perceives that there are time constraints on the search for information regarding the available consequences of the decision. Satisficing can be defined as providing a solution to a problem that meets only the most minimal of requirements. Analogizing is the search for solutions using a similar problem situation as a guide.

Affiliative constraints on the decision making process include all the various kinds of need arising from the decision maker's affiliation with the organization as a whole, with a department of an organization, or with whatever face-to-face committee or work team he or she has become associated. Affiliative needs are

associated with internal motives, such as the need for approval, and acceptability, the fear of not living up to expectations, and specific role demands. Affiliative constraints may operate in a work group by causing the members to become more concerned with preventing conflict and preserving social support than they are with the decision or solution needed to solve the problem under consideration.

Egocentric constraints are manifested in the decision maker's desire for prestige and through other identified self-serving motives, as well as the decision maker's ability to cope with stress, maintain self-esteem, and satisfy other emotional needs. Egocentric decision rules are divided into two categories: self-serving rules, which are directed toward satisfying strong personal motives, and emotive rules, which are directed toward satisfying strong emotional needs.

This paper examines cognitive decision making constraints. Janis (1989) contends that decisions made under cognitive constraints are likely to be related to policy and are therefore, highly consequential for the organization, particularly those decisions that are rapid fire. Therefore, cognitive constraints prove to be particularly interesting when examined in light of a school engaged in initiating participatory management structures.

Description of School Site

Located in rural northeastern Connecticut, Helmswood High School is a regionalized seventh through twelfth grade high school which serves three small rural towns. Helmswood High School

accommodates 321 students. The school has a minority population of 0.9%. The percentage of special education students is 14.5%. Of 1988 high school graduates, 25% continue on to four-year colleges. It employs 34 classroom teachers. The mean age for the teachers is 37 and their mean years of teaching experience is 8 years. The percentage of teachers who hold a master's degree or better is 77%. The mean teacher salary is $31,270.00.

This school was selected as a research site for investigating rural teacher decision making in that the principal had recently restructured the school in an attempt to ensure teacher decision making. The school governance structure had been in operation for one year. Teachers were grouped into what were called Centers of Excellence. These centers are operated by teachers in four school related areas: (1) student discipline and student governance, (2) grading and scheduling, (3) physical planning, and (4) curriculum. Teachers were give the authority to attack specific problem areas in each center. When a solution had been reached, the teachers then solicited full faculty input. The faculty discussed the proposal in a faculty meeting and the center regrouped to make the final decision. The role of the school vice principal had been assumed by a team of four teachers, who acted under the title of School Coordinators.

Data Collection and Analysis

When permission was granted to conduct the study, teachers were contacted and informed about the intent of the research. Teacher interviews were scheduled during teacher preparation

periods or before and after school. Interviews lasted approximately one hour.

A standardized open-ended interview was used to achieve a greater uniformity of measurement and served to ease the coding of the data (Kerlinger, 1973). A standardized open-ended interview increased the comparability of responses and aided in insuring that the data were complete for each subject on the topic addressed. It also facilitated the organization and analysis of the data. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Content validity was determined by a peer review and a pilot testing of the interview schedule in a comparable secondary school which had also initiated participatory decision making structures. Peer examination was utilized to confirm codings and finding as they emerged from the data. This was done to ensure internal validity (Merriam, 1988).

Data analysis for the study followed established procedures of case study and naturalistic research in three phases. The inductive, phenomenological approach by Lincoln and Guba (1985) guided early stages of data analysis. Later stages of analysis employed more systematic processes in order to finalize conclusions drawn from the data (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1985). When all the data were read, issues began to solidify and tentative theme coding emerged. Data were then regrouped and fit conceptually as subsets into the areas supported by the research question.

Findings

Eisner (1991) contends that a major feature of qualitative

studies is "the use of expressive language and the presence of voice in the text," and considers "voice" to be crucial "in furthering human understanding" (36-37). Wolcott (1990) also believes that the use of voice in the text is crucial, and admits a "bias in favor of trying to capture the expressed thoughts of others, rather than relying too singularly on what I have observed and interpreted" (130). He explains:

> I make a conscious effort to include primary data in my final accounts, not only to give readers an idea of what my data are like but to give access to the data themselves. Informants are given a forum for presenting their own case to whatever extent possible and reasonable. (130)

Due to the perceptual nature of this study, the teachers' own voices have been used. This is in keeping with Eisner's (1991) and Wolcott's (1990) conviction that teachers must be allowed to tell their own stories and relay their own beliefs and perceptions.

Teachers at Helmswood High School perceived that the majority of their decisions were made under cognitive constraints and indicated that the lack of adequate information and time were problematic. Lack of information was often attributed to lack of time and vice versa. Without the time to gain specific information about a student, a student-related program, or an event, it is not possible for a teacher to make a decision that could correctly serve the situation or solve the problem. Teachers reported that information constraints existed in such areas as students' home problems, and student programs offered by the state.

A reading teacher in the school explained that students' problems in the home were pervasive.

> There are certain constraints you have in the background. For example, when students have family problems you would like to be able to do certain things. And it seems like a lot of our students do have those kinds of problems.

This same teacher expressed frustration in not having the time to explore the problems the student might be having in the home.

> You always have time constraints. I come in early and I'm usually here pretty late then I bring work home and so, you can't always do everything that you wanted to, just because you don't have that much time.

A special education instructor believed that time constraints limited her ability to research certain programs going on in the state for students who are physically challenged.

> One thing that came up recently is not knowing about a state program that we were thinking about sending a student to. I've been there before, but it had a real turnover of people and that's probably some place that I would like to get to, in order to see what's going on. But that's also time away from the classroom and I've been through several inservices this year where I missed the kids already.

Teachers expressed a lack of information regarding what was occurring in other classroom. This they believed was also directly related to a lack of time. One English teacher remarked that:

> The time issue and the coordination with other teachers constrains us the most. Time. Period. Exclamation point.

The lack of time to make decisions in conjunction with other teachers, according to this same teacher showed a faulty commitment on the part of the principal in providing teachers with formal opportunities to meet and exchange ideas.

> Decision making with other teachers is difficult in that time is not provided in this school for that, generally speaking. We have sort of a token time, an expanded lunch period. Last year it used to be just twenty minutes; this year it's forty minutes. Those teachers who you need to plan with are not available during that

> time period. They have classes and it can't be done. So, the fifteen year gripe of mine with the school system is the team approach to decision making is not a priority when it comes to scheduling. It's just physically impossible for you to be in two places at once, although we try.

Time constraints were attributed to lack of administrative support. Some teachers believed that the lack of time under which they had to make decisions was related somehow to the principal's personal agenda and they criticized him for having them make important school decisions rapidly. One teacher provided an example of a recent faculty meeting.

> Well, I'll give you one quick example that will cover it in a nutshell. There was a question brought up at the faculty meeting yesterday that was a major board policy change and we were going to be asked to vote on it within five minutes. That shows some frustration too. How can you make a decision in five minutes, when you haven't discussed it, you haven't researched it? I don't know how far to go. There are some staff members who are unconcerned, are sort of, let things happen, make the rules and I'll live with them. There are other who say, "Let's do some research." Finally, somebody said, "This should be brought back to committee [Centers of Excellence]. That's why we have the committee." We started discussing it there. We can't vote on it right now, this quick. It doesn't make sense. We've got to talk about it.

Time constraints caused teachers to become uncertain in their decision making and the quick changes in the governance structure of the school became confusing for teachers. As one teacher remarked:

> There's been so many different changes, it's practically enough time to formulate an opinion and figure out, gee, is this going to work? Is it not going to work? And all of a sudden, it's in your lap and you're still reeling from the last one. Give us a chance to use it. Give us a chance to figure this out before we do another one. Just the inability to really formulate really educated opinion as to whether or not the decision was a good one

> or a bad one. Not really having enough time, just having to kind of go with it. I don't know if I wanted it, when the first way may have been better, or maybe an alternate plan may have been better. You're really not about to evaluate and without a proper evaluation, how can you make another decision on maybe a whole different issue, and you're still reeling from the last one.

A music teacher attributed this rapid fire decision making to the school restructuring that had recently taken place.

> I feel that we went into a school restructuring phase in the school, which I don't feel is bad, but the rate at which it hit us. It came so quickly and massively and so suddenly and there were so many changes at once, it is very, very difficult to handle.

Teachers were also concerned that becoming involved in school-wide decision making change could cause classroom instruction to suffer. Some teachers stated that it was difficult to think about programmatic changes while in the midst of teaching responsibilities.

> It's too much to think about and be able to teach and do the curriculum and get the kids out of here in June when we're suppose to. It's a lot of responsibility, but all in good time...Give me a chance. In the meantime, I'm teaching. And I think that's probably the biggest item.

A High School Coordinator reported that she also believed the school governance change had occurred too quickly and disclosed that faculty were made to feel as though they were forced to make decisions before they were ready.

> I believe that probably a greater readiness should have been in place before we got involved, because we have the cart before the horse, almost...That's wrong. It's too quick.

A Spanish teacher seconded this notion.

> You just can't come in and just totally upheave a school and all of sudden give all the power to the quote unquote teachers, because frankly, we weren't trained in

> administrative procedures. We haven't been trained at any of that, so although we have opinions as to how it [the school] should be changed, it just seems to be a lot of openendedness, and that makes me, and I can represent other faculty members, very uncomfortable, because I don't feel as though we have any place that we're going to. We don't have a goal. We aren't going in any one direction. There's so many things being changed that we've really lost all concept of why are we even here. We're here for the kids. So, let's just go and do the changes that are going to best benefit the children, the students that we have here, then we'll work from that.

Another teacher summarized the problems inherent in rapid change.

> I think what they gain by a quick fix is lost in terms of one's feeling that we're working as a team and a unit. There's a good faith problem later on. And I really believe that about anyone who's in authority and making a decision in their realm. When they go for the hasty decision, it's letting people sort of muddle around in what's going on.

Other teachers reported operating under what Lortie (1969) has called "pseudo decision making," whereby the appearance of decision making power is provided, however in reality, the decision has been already been made by the administrator in charge. This was supported by a math teacher who maintained that:

> Ideas come in and they seem to be thrown at us. Decisions are made, we think we have input on them, but they've already really been made and then the ideas are backed away from, so there's confusion and then more ideas come...Confusing. It brings sudden changes.

Teachers recounted that they often felt manipulated by the principal. One teacher described her role in school decision making to be a "farce" and stated that the language behind words such as "teacher empowerment" and "school restructuring" were being used dishonestly by the principal of the school.

> Many times we're being told that we're being given more autonomy in school decision making and we're told that we're being given more teacher empowerment. But it doesn't end up being that way. Even though it's said that you have a lot of input into decision making and school policy as a whole, it's really not the case when you come right down to it. I would prefer more decision making in school policy, or I would prefer more honesty. If we're not going to have decision making responsibilities, then I would like that to be set forth. I would like to know that if I'm not making the decision, then that's the way it is, rather than being told that I'm getting all sorts of empowerment and knowing deep down that I'm not empowered.

Teachers at Helmswood asserted that if they are told that they are to be empowered than they would in essence like to feel empowered. As one teacher explained:

> If I'm told that I'm going to be empowered, if I'm told that I'm going to be able to make decisions, if I'm told that I'm going to have input, I guess I would really like to have it. That's all I want. If I'm told that I can do something, I want to be able to take it and I want to be able to run with it. If I'm going to be empowered, then I want the power that I'm told that I have.

A Spanish teacher maintained that her participation in school decision making was demoralizing.

> I really think a lot of decision that have been made, have already been made and that it kind of appears as though we have input, but all the decisions, whether they be big or small ones, have pretty much already been decided, before it's really been thought about, before the input has really been given by the faculty.

Implications

The generalization that school based participatory decision making "is a mainstay of school organization in rural areas" (Lewis, A., 1989) was not supported by this case study. School restructuring and the initiating of participatory management

structures has been predicated on the belief that teachers are in the best position to make decisions concerning students' welfare. It is evident that teachers at Helmswood High School were experiencing high levels of frustration regarding the lack of time in which to make decisions and some feared that their decisions were not always "doing the best for the kids." Teachers believed they participated in rapid fire decision making, and many of their decisions were substandard in that they had no time for examining potential consequences or evaluation. This case study clearly suggests that time considerations must be examined very closely when implementing participatory decision making structures.

Perhaps, even more problematic was the fact that Helmswood High School operated under a tremendous contexual constraint (Keith & Girling, 1991). The teachers were operating under a "groupthink" in that they believed that participatory decision making existed in name only. Teachers at Helmswood, often felt that though their input has been solicited, the decision had in effect been made. Regardless of whether this is fact or fiction, they perceived that they were operating as pseudo decision makers. A belief Lortie (1969) postulated over twenty years ago. One teacher summarized the relationship between cognitive constraints and teacher empowerment quite clearly.

> I want to be able to make decisions in an adequate amount of time. I don't want to be forced into making a decision that I don't believe that I'm ready for. If it's empowerment, I want to be empowered to make those decisions. I don't want to have too many decision made in a hasty way, and I don't want it to have an adverse affect on the school. I don't want to be forced into making a decision.

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